

Senate Bill 191
March 17, 2015
Presented by Chas Van Genderen
House State Administration Committee

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, I am Chas Van Genderen, Administrator for Montana State Parks, a division of the Montana Department of Fish Wildlife and Parks. I am here on behalf of the Director in support of SB 191. This bill would give the Parks system the opportunity to contract for up to 14 years instead of the existing seven with current and prospective concessionaires.

Basically, this simple bill started out as one that would have given give the state park system the same opportunity that already exists within National Parks and under current law for Virginia and Nevada City – up to a 20 year length of contract.

Montana's tourism economy and State Park system is growing. In 2002, parks hosted 1.25 million visits. In 2014, we now host 2.25 million. That increase of 1 million has the park system stretched to its limits. We should have one of the strongest state park systems in the country. To do that we want to bring new solutions forward while also investing public monies. This bill is about the "new solutions" aspect of improving your parks.

In 2012, we hired a contractor to analyze concession opportunities within Montana's park system. This consultant used to be the head of National Park Service concessions. His findings indicated that we needed to extend the term of concession and visitor service contracts so that the private sector can make smarter investments as part of providing services in state parks. They need a business plan that pencils out with their banker. He highlighted the potential for the park system to grow in concert with private businesses. In this win-win relationship, these businesses would build jobs and support our tourism based economy.

When the Montana State Parks and Recreation Board discussed this concept, they correctly observed that this need had already been addressed by the National Park Service, and in other sections of state law. In each of those cases the law states that a contract length up to 20 years is appropriate. A longer contract length has helped other parks and recreation providers, and will help the State of Montana.

We want to find ways to bring forth more productive contractual agreements in state parks so we can better serve our guests, while continuing to improve Montana's tourism economy. We believe we can do that if contract length is extended to 14 years. We can do it even better, should you wish to amend the bill to a contract length of 20 years. We urge your support of SB 191, and I will be available for questions.

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